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ABSTRACT

This report describes the findings of 10 focus group meetings that discussed issues related to the performance of students with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) on Minnesota's Basic Standards Exams. Ten groups were formed, with one group of parents and one of students representing each of the following language communities: Cambodian, Hmong, Lao, Spanish, and Vietnamese. During the meetings, participants were asked what they knew about Minnesota's graduation tests, their thoughts about testing options for students with LEP, concerns they had, good ways to communicate with parents about school matters, and what parents can do to help their children be successful on tests and in school. Findings from the focus groups are that: (1) most parents and students favored Basic Standards testing as a part of high school graduation requirements; (2) there was confusion over the various testing programs being conducted in schools; (3) participants in both groups were unaware that there are some special options available for students with LEP, including extra time, separate settings, written translations, audiotapes, and different scoring options; and (4) there is a need for early communication with parents to help them prepare their students for the tests. Recommendations for communication about graduation standards are provided. (CR)

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STATE ASSESSMENT SERIES
Minnesota Report 12

Cambodian, Hmong, Lao, Spanish-Speaking, and Vietnamese Parents and Students Speak Out on Minnesota's Basic Standards Tests

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The Minnesota Assessment Project is a four-year, federally funded effort awarded to the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement. The project's goal is to promote and evaluate the participation of students with limited English proficiency and students with disabilities in Minnesota's Graduation Standards. Specifically, the project will examine ways in which students with limited English and students with disabilities can participate in the Basic Standards Exams of reading, mathematics and written composition and in the performance-based assessments of the high standards in the Profile of Learning.

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Overview

Since the early 1990s, the emphasis on accountability for student learning has steadily increased (see Bond, Braskamp, & Roeber, 1996; Office of Technology Assessment, 1992). In many states, policymakers have chosen to implement assessments that are used to determine whether students earn a high school diploma. Minnesota — for many years without any statewide assessment — is now implementing the Minnesota Basic Standards Tests, which must be passed for high school graduation. These assessments are composed of tests in reading, mathematics, and written composition.

As in other states, numerous issues are facing Minnesota about how students with limited English proficiency (LEP) participate in these assessments. Questions are being raised about how participation decisions are made, and what kinds of accommodations are reasonable for students to use when they participate.

In 1995, the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning (CFL) and the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) received funding from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) to study the participation of students with limited English proficiency in Minnesota's Basic Standards Tests. The Minnesota Assessment Project has conducted literature reviews (Liu, Thurlow, Vieburg, El Sawaf & Ruhland, 1996) and has held focus groups with teachers on the topic of LEP students and Minnesota's new assessment program (Liu, Spicuzza & Erickson, 1996). In the fall of 1996, focus groups were conducted with parents and students with limited English proficiency. This report relates to the experiences of LEP students and their parents during early administrations of the tests, beginning in Spring 1995.

Test Performance of Minnesota LEP Students

Even though the Basic Standards Tests address minimum competencies needed to succeed as an adult, many educators and researchers who work with LEP students in the state of Minnesota anticipate that large numbers of these students will still have difficulty passing the tests. According to the assessment literature, poor test performance for LEP students can be related to many factors, including immigrant status, a lack of fluency in English, an inconsistent educational background, poverty, test bias, and a lack of access to courses that teach the test content.

Many experts on LEP issues believe that there is an urgent need for new educational programs and policies to ensure that as many LEP students as possible attain the basic skills and go on to graduate from high school. However, there currently are no data available on the participation and achievement of LEP students in the first round of Basic Standards testing (1995-96) because participation was optional for all schools.

Assessment Supports for LEP Students

There is a variety of literature on topics related to the assessment of LEP students, some of which discusses types of support used in states with high stakes graduation exams. There is general agreement that in high stakes assessments, people who speak English as their second language (in particular LEP students and parents) need to be involved with the following:

- Help develop a test that is as free of cultural bias as possible.
- Recommend procedures for determining the participation and exemption of LEP students.
- Give input on useful testing accommodations for LEP students to ensure that as many of them are tested as possible.

- Recommend remediation procedures for students who do not pass the tests.
- Recommend procedures for communicating information about the tests to parents and to the broader non-native English speaking community.
- Give input on the testing experience so that educators can determine whether the testing situation itself was conducted equitably and can make changes for the next testing cycle.

Our search of the literature turned up no resources specifically discussing what LEP students and parents think about the issues on the above list. The Minnesota Assessment Project is interested in knowing: What is the testing experience like for LEP students on the Basic Standards Tests? Is it equitable from their point of view? Are there accommodations that they would like to have that are not currently offered? For answers to these questions, project staff turned to LEP students and parents in Minnesota for their views on the assessment process.

The Minnesota Assessment Project conducted 10 focus groups to follow-up on the Spring 1996 Basic Standards testing cycle.

Procedures

The Minnesota Assessment Project conducted 10 focus groups to follow-up on the Spring 1996 Basic Standards testing cycle. The purpose of convening these groups was to discuss issues related to the performance of students with limited English proficiency. Ten groups were formed with one group of parents and one of students representing each of the following language communities: Cambodian, Hmong, Lao, Spanish-speaking, and Vietnamese. The focus groups took place in October and November of 1996.

The parent meetings were set up through community leaders who contacted participants and arranged transportation. The student meetings were arranged through ESL teachers, school counselors, and community social workers. All of the meetings took place in school facilities except for the Cambodian parents meeting, which took place at

the United Cambodian Association of Minnesota in St. Paul. The meetings lasted from one to two hours. The Spanish, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Lao parent groups were conducted in the language of the participants with the aid of an interpreter. The Hmong parent group and all of the student groups were conducted in English. During the meetings, the participants were asked to respond to the following questions:

- What do you know about Minnesota graduation tests?
- What do you think about the testing options for students who are learning English?
- What concerns do you have about these tests?
- What are good ways to communicate with parents about school matters?
- What can parents do to help their children be successful on the tests and at school in general?

Participants in all groups said that LEP students need to take advantage of all opportunities available during high school so they will be productive and contributing adults after they have graduated.

The information obtained from the focus group meetings is summarized below. The information is organized according to these four topics: (1) General Educational Issues, (2) Basic Standards Testing, (3) Learning in Two Languages, and (4) Communication with Parents.

Findings

General Educational Issues

Participants in all groups said that LEP students need to take advantage of all opportunities available during high school so they will be productive and contributing adults after they have graduated. As part of these opportunities, learning and using English was very important to many focus group participants. One parent suggested that if students want to go to college and they do not know English, there is nothing available for them here in Minnesota — beyond high school, students

must communicate in only English. Another said that very few minorities are in advanced academic programs. She did not want her children left out of these programs. For that reason, she did not want special help in Hmong for her children. She was concerned that special help in Hmong would keep them from having opportunities available to other students. As another parent stated, "I want my child to know like your people."

Much of the feedback focused on teaching and instruction. Several parents said that they wanted their children's teachers to help their children and encourage them to study. Concerns were raised that schools did not have enough books and materials to allow students to study at home. One parent believed students in rural areas had fewer resources and opportunities to learn than students in the cities.

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Respect for teachers was another issue raised by parents. Many commented that in their home countries students were intimidated by the teacher, but in America the students are not. While some thought American teachers give the students too much freedom, another parent cautioned that if schools here are too strict the students will not listen or may even leave.

One parent thought schools should establish programs for the very young children to teach them to read. She warned that a lot of parents do not read in either language and suggested that children of these parents need special help. She related the example of a student who had just arrived in the country and was frightened to begin seventh grade because he did not know any English, and needed more help in his own language as well.

Some parents and students questioned the quality of English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. Fears were expressed by both parents and students that many students who are in ESL for a long time are falling behind because they are missing instruction in other subjects. One student wondered if taking ESL courses will have a negative effect on her chance to go to college. Another student thought that students have too much freedom to choose classes. As one student stated: "We

have a lot of choices in classes. Some students choose all electives. They don't worry about taking chemistry and algebra." Suggestions were made that many students in ESL classes may not even need this type of instruction.

Basic Standards Testing

General Comments

Most parents and students favored having Basic Standards testing as a part of high school graduation requirements.

Most parents and students favored Basic Standards testing as a part of high school graduation requirements. One student approved having requirements for students to achieve before giving them a diploma. A parent said the tests are important in showing that her son is successful in school, and that she will be proud when he passes the test and graduates. Other parents said the tests are necessary to be sure that students can read, write, and do basic mathematics — the skills needed to continue their education after high school.

Several comments focused on those students who may not initially pass the tests. Concerned that students are currently promoted from grade to grade without knowing how to read, one participant suggested that if students do not pass these tests, they should be held back another year so that they will try harder. However, another parent feared that if the students are held back they will become discouraged and not want to learn. A student suggested that the test could show who needs more help, while some parents believed that students will begin to work seriously if they do not pass the tests. Another parent thought it was advantageous to have the tests in eighth grade since LEP students can start preparation for these tests when they are young.

Many participants had qualifying comments and questions about the tests. While one parent thought that his children (who have been in the United States for some time) would not have difficulty passing the tests, other parents worried about students who are recent arrivals and those who do not know English well. One student wondered who determined the tests' level of difficulty since test difficulty would differ among students with varying degrees of English proficiency. Some participants

suggested having different test levels, or even different tests — one for students who know English and one for those who do not. Others suggested separating students into high, medium, and low levels, and assigning students to different tests, depending on their proficiency in English. Others suggested different tests for students in Advanced Placement (AP) classes.

The focus groups revealed some confusion over the various testing programs already being conducted in schools. Some parents knew that their children took other schoolwide tests (such as the Metropolitan Achievement Test and the American College Testing Program), but they did not know the purpose of or the difference between these various tests.

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Comments about the 1996 Tests from Students Who Took the Tests

Some of the students who participated in the Basic Standards Tests in 1996 provided valuable feedback during the focus group meetings on their experiences.

In general, the students believed they should have had more notice so that they could have been better prepared for the tests. They had little idea of what the content of the tests would be, and reported that even their teachers did not know what sorts of questions were going to be included. One student believed she would do better this year because she would know more about the test content, and because she could take practice questions to get ready. Students reported that there had been a time limit set for the tests in the 1996 administration.

Not surprisingly, several students said they did not like the tests, but other students provided more specific feedback. Most students said the reading was more difficult than the mathematics test. In fact, one student commented that the reading test did not make sense, stating, "I read it, but my mind went off somewhere else while my mouth kept on reading." Many students thought that the reading test was too long. They had difficulty concentrating on the test from beginning to end. One

student admitted that, after a while, he simply wrote down any answer just so he could finish. Students also commented that the reading passages in general were uninteresting and did not relate to their lives or to what they have learned. Some students found the questions difficult. They often could not make a connection between the vocabulary in the text and the vocabulary in the questions because different words were used. At the same time, they found some answer choices so similar that they could not choose between them. Many students commented on the difficult vocabulary, and suggested a variety of ways to overcome this difficulty, including: using a dictionary, using a simpler vocabulary on the test, avoiding idioms on the test, including definitions or glossaries as part of the test materials, and preteaching certain words that are likely to be on the test.

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On the other hand, other students believed that the tests were not hard if they could take their time. These students suggested that some students did not take the test seriously. One student said, "It matters if you are going to graduate or not; some don't take it seriously enough." Another student added that some students may have thought that they were not going to graduate anyway, or that the tests were too difficult, when they probably could have passed if they had tried.

Participants' Questions about the Tests

Several students and many of the parents commented that the focus groups were beneficial because they had a chance to talk about the tests and ask questions. In all of the groups, participants had several questions about the tests, including the following:

- What about students who arrive in later grades? What will happen to them?
- If we pass the tests, does that mean we are ready to go to college?
- What is the level of these tests? [1, 2]

- What happens to students who do not pass? Will they be given extra help?
- Do they use the scores on these tests to mark how high students perform? Would passing these tests with high marks help students to graduate with honor?
- What if a student gets high grades but does not pass the tests?
- If you pass a test, do you have to take it again? [1,2]
- If students do not pass, can they take the test again? [2]
- What happens to the 12th grade student who does not pass the test?
- What happens if the student takes the test in another state?
- Do the students who do not pass this year have to take the writing test?
- Are the requirements different for ESL students?
- Does the student have to pass these tests in order to move on in school?
- Are these special tests for ESL students?
- Do the tests cover all the curriculum or just ESL?
- Are the schools and the state working together successfully? Do these tests create a hardship for the schools?
- If you do not pass one part, do you just retake that part?
- Is it the same test every time?
- Did last year's test count? [1]

[1] Common concern among students

[2] Common concern among parents

Awareness of Testing Accommodations and Special Scoring Options

Participants in most groups were unaware that there are some special options available for LEP students. Each group listened to an

explanation of the various options and they were asked to comment on the value of each option. In general, the participants agreed that students should have a chance to take the test in the same way as other students since after high school these students will have to compete without any special arrangements. For particular students, however, some special arrangements might be advisable. In those cases, the individual students should have the opportunity to agree to the special arrangements rather than having a teacher or counselor decide for them. Parents suggested asking students for their ideas about what would help them succeed on the tests.

Participants in most groups were unaware that there are some special options available for LEP students.

The following section addresses specific accommodations allowed for LEP students participating in the Basic Standards Tests, and the comments received from focus group participants about each one.

Extra Time

Although the tests are untimed, many of the students who took the test in 1996 said that they had not been able to finish because the test administrator told them to stop. Since the tests are untimed, students strongly suggested making it clear to those administering the test that students should be allowed as much time as they need.

Separate Setting

Participants in all groups agreed that offering LEP students a special room for taking the test could be helpful. Student participants commented that when other students got up to leave, they felt pressure to leave as well, and in some cases simply marked answers on their answer sheets so they would be done. Many agreed that taking the test with other LEP students would be more comfortable because other students would be needing additional time, and there would be less pressure to stop before completing the test. They emphasized, however, that it should be the student's choice; students should not be separated from other students without agreeing to the separation.

Written Translation

Participants in all groups thought that translation of the directions could help some students. Feedback from students clearly indicated that some had missed certain parts of the directions. Some students did not know they could write on the mathematics test booklet, using it as a place to calculate. Since they had no other paper, they took the whole test by working all of the problems in their heads or with calculators. One student commented that it was difficult to transpose the geometric figures in his head.

Most participants thought that some, but not all, students would benefit from a translation of the math test or the writing prompt, especially after learning that all of the math items were word problems. But many were concerned about the potentially negative consequences of students receiving a "Pass-Translate" notation on their records. Also, a Cambodian parent and a Hmong parent pointed out that their children have never attempted math problems in their first languages. Therefore, these parents did not think a translation would help the students because they lacked the necessary vocabulary. Other parents emphasized that the translation would have to be oral, not written, because many students could not read their first language.

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Audiotapes

Participants generally agreed that there might be some students with low reading skills who would benefit from listening to a tape in English of the Basic Standards Test in mathematics.

Scoring Options

Participants agreed that a "Pass-LEP" scoring option for the Basic Standards Test of Written Composition would be helpful for some students. They thought this option would be especially crucial for 12th grade students who are at risk of not graduating. Nevertheless, parents want their children to have every opportunity to achieve at the "Pass-State" level. One parent commented that "Pass-Translate" and "Pass-

LEP" are acceptable as long as it would not be held against students if they have to take the tests several times in order to achieve "Pass-State."

Test Preparation

The most frequent suggestion for helping students succeed was to prepare them well for the tests. All students and parents supported spending class time on practice tests. One student said that last year his teacher had given the students a practice test to take home, telling them they would take a similar test in a week. The student suggested this kind of practice was not helpful because he did not have the opportunity to check his answers and discuss what he did not know. Other students commented that practice tests should be used to diagnose where students need help so they can spend time on those areas. Both parents and students wanted copies of the practice test to take home from the focus groups.

The most frequent suggestion for helping students succeed was to prepare them well for the tests.

Some participants suggested special classes to prepare students for the tests. One 11th grade student participant suggested offering a class like the one he is taking to prepare for the ACT. Parents supported the idea of special classes and expect teachers to do whatever is necessary to help students pass. One parent suggested having tutors for individual students who are having difficulty passing the tests. Another said that if her child reaches 12th grade without being able to pass the Basic Standards Test in reading, she will view it as the fault of the school system. In general, parents did not want the tests made easier for LEP students; they want the students to be taught effectively so they can pass at the standard level.

Learning in Two Languages

Parent participants expressed a desire for their children to become fluent in English. The parents who did not speak English often expressed a feeling of helplessness in not knowing how to help their children in school. Some parents stated that while it is important for their children to learn English, they should not forget their first language. Many

participants commented on their children's limited skills in their first language. As one student put it, "I don't know that much in my old language. I just know enough to understand when someone talks to me." A parent commented that when he talks to his child about numbers or money, the child uses English to check his understanding. Another parent said that after three years in the United States, neither his child's English nor his Vietnamese seems that good. Many parents commented that their children cannot read their first language, even when the parents are literate in that language.

Most participants agreed that it is reasonable to have a 3-year exemption for students who have recently started in an English-speaking school system. However, one participant suggested that this may not be long enough — that students should not take the tests before they are ready. Another thought that the exemption should be for five years.

Some participants discussed the use of translated tests. A student questioned the idea of having the writing prompt translated into Cambodian and then having to write the composition in English. She thought going back and forth between the two languages would be confusing. In general, participants acknowledged both the challenge and the importance of learning English well enough to be successful in school.

Not all of the parents participating in the focus groups fully understood that their children are required to pass the Basic Standards Tests in order to graduate.

Communication with Parents

Not all of the parents participating in the focus groups fully understood that their children are required to pass the Basic Standards Tests in order to graduate. Most of the Spanish-speaking parents knew about the tests in Texas and assumed that the Minnesota tests were similar. Other parents knew that schoolwide tests existed, but did not know the purpose of any of them. Several parents believed that the results of the Basic Standards Tests would give them some idea of how their children are progressing. Students thought that it was important for their parents to understand the purposes behind testing, because they rely on their parents for support and encouragement. One student, however, did not

think it was important that his parents know about the tests, since he saw passing the tests as his sole responsibility.

Many parents expanded their comments to discuss general communication with the school. Some parents with very little formal educational experience found schools confusing and threatening. Some parents were frustrated that they did not know with certainty whether their children actually went to school. Several parents expressed concern that they could not call the school because they did not speak English and no one at the school spoke their native language. Some parents thought that schools do more for families from other ethnic groups, while their group is overlooked.

Focus group members recommended that communication with parents begin early.

Many parents expressed frustration over balancing work and their involvement with school. They work long hours and are not available during the day. They may have time in the evening to talk to teachers, but at that time there is usually no one at school. Other parents are working two jobs. They have little time or energy left to deal with school, a place that seems more intimidating than welcoming.

Focus group members recommended that communication with parents begin early. Some parents said that they should know about the tests when their children are in elementary school so that they can be sure their children are learning the basic skills from the start. Some ways that were suggested for communicating with parents include:

Send written notes home with students. Parents who are literate in a language other than English asked that communication from school be sent to them both in English and in their first language.

Communicate with community social service organizations or community elders. Some participants suggested presenting a video at a community meeting so that people could ask questions and discuss the implications of new policies and programs.

Utilize media in the native languages. Some participants suggested native language newspapers, and radio and television

programs. These types of resources make community announcements regularly.

Communicate with parent groups that are active at various schools. The participants stressed the importance of having some of these meetings in the native languages of the parents. If the meetings are only in English, many parents will not come because they cannot understand what is being said.

Have a registration meeting for parents and students at the beginning of the school year. At a meeting, parents and students could learn about special requirements such as graduation tests.

Focus Group Feedback

The parents who attended the focus groups said that these meetings were helpful, and that they appreciated the opportunity to discuss the new requirements and to ask questions. Many of the students also said that they appreciated the opportunity to talk about the Basic Standards Tests, to ask questions, and to obtain more information.

Recommendations

On December 4, 1996, a task force of educational professionals working with LEP students met to discuss the results of the ten focus groups. The recommendations of the task force addressed two broad areas: communicating about graduation standards and preparing LEP students for Basic Standards Tests. Participating in the task force were: Connie Walker, University of Minnesota; Kathryn Heinze, Hamline University; Soua Yang, Minneapolis Public Schools; Judith Strohl, Minneapolis Public Schools; Julieta Wahlberg, St. Paul Public Schools; Kristi Liu, National Center on Educational Outcomes; and Bounlieng Phommasouvanh, Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Learning.

Communication about Graduation Standards

Comments from each focus group revealed that parents and students did not have accurate and thorough information about the Basic Standards Tests. The following recommendations are suggested as ways to ensure all parents and students receive information that they can understand on both the Basic Standards and the High Standards:

Communicate information repeatedly and in a variety of ways. Written notices should be sent by mail and be written in both English and the home language of each student. Messages could be sent home on audio tapes for parents who are not literate in any language. Videotapes explaining the Basic Standards Tests should be available in a variety of languages and distributed through community education and social services that work directly with diverse national origin groups. Meetings and community forums should be conducted in languages students and parents understand. Similarly, information could be broadcast on regularly scheduled radio programs and television programs that are currently being produced by the various language communities. The state should take the initiative in formatting announcements and producing translated materials that districts can use in communicating with parents.

Ideally, communication about graduation standards should begin when children enter school and continue as long as they are attending public schools.

Because the information is complex and detailed, it is important that parents and students have the opportunity to process the information and ask questions about anything they do not understand. Ideally, communication about graduation standards should begin when children enter school and continue as long as they are attending public schools.

Inform parents of LEP students that they can have an influential role. Parents of LEP students can help determine the process that guides the participation of their students in the Basic Standards Tests. This is one step toward the larger goal of increasing parent involvement in the education of LEP students. The culture of the school may be strange and intimidating to parents from other national origins. Thoughtful efforts should be made to establish effective

communication and mutual support between schools and parents of LEP students.

Help students understand the importance of these tests. Basic Standards Tests have important consequences. In that sense they are different from some of the other standardized tests that students take. It is imperative that students clearly understand all the requirements for graduation and the role the Basic Standards Tests have in those requirements.

Preparing LEP Students for Basic Standards Tests

Meeting the Basic Standards by the end of their 12th grade year could be difficult for some LEP students. The current performance of some LEP students on standardized tests, the 1996 Basic Standards Tests, and practice tests indicate the need for many LEP students to make significant progress before they will be able to pass the Basic Standards. The following recommendations address the need for LEP students to be given adequate opportunities to prepare for and be successful in taking these exams:

It is imperative that students clearly understand all the requirements for graduation and the role the Basic Standards Tests have in those requirements.

Effective ESL instruction requires careful planning and commitment of resources. Students can best develop language skills when they attend small classes with other students who are at a similar level of language development. These classes need to meet daily for a reasonable period of time in a space conducive to practicing and learning language. Adequate learning materials to support instruction must be available.

The education of LEP students is not a responsibility that belongs solely to the ESL teachers. All teachers working with LEP students share this responsibility; therefore, all teachers must make their curriculum accessible to the LEP students in their classes. Those who teach LEP students need to understand how learning to read in a second language is different from learning to read in the first language.

In addition, districts must consider second language issues when designing programs and choosing textbooks.

LEP students must have real opportunities to learn all of the required curriculum. Even when LEP students are placed in special classes that focus on building basic reading, math, and writing skills, they must not be excluded from courses that present required curriculum. The parents who participated in the focus groups clearly stated that it was important for their children to learn English and complete the curriculum required of other students. They realized that effective instruction is the key to that achievement, and they supported that instruction even if it means an extended day or summer school for their children. Instruction in basic skills should be *in addition to* the grade level curriculum, not instead of it.

The parents who participated in the focus groups clearly stated that it was important for their children to learn English and complete the curriculum required of other students.

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